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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF EDUCATION COMMITS TO CONTINUING STRONG USG
PARTNERSHIP BUT RAISES TOUGH QUESTIONS

REF: 09 KABUL 3907

¶1. (U) Summary: During Ambassador Eikenberry's February 1 courtesy call on recently confirmed Minister of Education, Farooq Wardak, the Minister provided a detailed presentation on Afghanistan's education crisis. The presentation was filled with well-documented statistics on the lack of educational opportunities - particularly in the insurgent areas. Although Afghanistan has made progress, it continues to have one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. Moreover, the lack of educational opportunities for the growing youth population is an exponentially increasing impediment to social and economic progress and stability in Afghanistan. The Minister questioned USG priorities, noting that the education sector receives far less assistance than any other USG-supported sector. The Ambassador noted that the USG is the largest contributor to Afghanistan's educational sector and will work with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to help improve donor coordination and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) budget prioritization. End Summary.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

¶2. (U) Wardak was easily confirmed in the first round of Parliamentary voting with a vote of 120 yea, 93 Nay, and 18 Abstain/blank/spoiled. He is the Lead Minister for the Human Resources Development Cluster, which includes participation by Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs. A popular Minister and consummate politician, the former Parliamentary Affairs Minister knew his way around the political scene when he was first appointed Minister of Education in October 2008. A doctor by training, Wardak left the country during the Soviet-backed regime and returned in order to provide medical assistance to war-wounded Afghans. He worked for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) for a decade, as a deputy and as director of its health program, which was the largest health care provider at the time in Afghanistan. He also holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Preston.

THE MINISTER'S POWERPOINT: HARBINGER OF DOOM?

¶3. (U) The Minister's presentation began with an historical overview of the education system. After years of conflict and the draconian measures placed on the education system during the Taliban years, primary and secondary education in 2002 was devastated. Female participation in education was almost non-existent. Less than one million children attended school and there were only around 3,200 schools in the country and 20,000 teachers. These teachers were unfamiliar with modern content or teaching methodologies. Thanks in large part to USG assistance, enrollment has increased to seven million and the number of teachers has expanded to over 175,000. The number of teacher trainees has increased over a hundred times. There are now over 10,000 primary and secondary schools in the country. Female participation in education at all levels is at the highest in Afghanistan's history. In addition, primary school students are learning a modernized Afghan curriculum.

14. (U) The major challenge, Wardak noted, was "the ticking time bomb that no donor has yet addressed the growing demand for education in Afghanistan." Only 42% of children have access to education - leaving five million Afghan children without access who account for 6.6% of the world's total out-of-school children. Wardak also focused on challenges for the growing number of secondary school graduates who have nowhere to continue their education. The secondary school system is producing an ever-increasing number of graduates: 79,000 this year with projections for up to 900,000 a year by 2020. The university system can only absorb 20% of grade 12 graduates. Meanwhile, technical high schools cannot enroll sufficient numbers of students to keep up with demand for skilled workers.

15. (U) Minister Wardak was worried the lack of educational opportunities could have destabilizing effects. He reiterated his frustration that donors were not providing more support to education and noted that insufficient attention to this area could undo gains in other sectors. The Minister also presented compelling statistics demonstrating that education in the 17 most insecure provinces is not keeping pace with the more secure areas of the country. He noted that lack of education makes these provinces a breeding ground for insurgent recruitment. Making matters worse in these 17 provinces is that, regardless of the demand for education, only 223 of 673 schools closed by insurgents have been re-opened, leaving thousands of children without hope for improving the lives of their families.

16. (U) The Minister's presentation concluded with 14 key priorities for increasing educational opportunities for 2010 and beyond. Wardak focused on building more schools to "eliminate the culture of the tent" (a reference to the typical school facility in many parts

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of the country) and training more teachers to keep up with the incredible youth explosion taking place in Afghanistan. The MoE estimates that Afghanistan needs 160,000 new teachers by 2014 to keep pace with current demand for education as Afghanistan's school-age population grew by more than three percent (or 250,000 children) last year. Even if the insurgents stopped destroying schools and obstructing attendance, the government would face a monumental challenge in furnishing enough classrooms and teachers for this burgeoning generation. (NOTE: These issues were previously reported in reftel 12958).

ON THE SPOT IDEAS

17. (U) The Minister concluded his presentation with a proposal for USG assistance - totaling almost four times the current education budget. Ambassador Eikenberry noted that the USG developmental assistance budget for Afghanistan was at historic highs and outlays for the education sector significant. He acknowledged that both the Afghan health and education sectors could benefit from further investments, especially in light of Minister Wardak's compelling plan. The Ambassador proposed that the USG take the lead in Kabul in assembling the major potential donors, especially Japan to discuss MoE plans and requirements.

18. (U) Ambassador Eikenberry encouraged the MoE and the GIROA to develop internal solutions to the budgetary shortfalls in education. He noted that between 2003 and 2006 the GIROA had higher budget execution rates; however, in 2007 implementation began to slow down leaving ministries with large amounts of unspent money. He wondered if the Ministry of Finance (MoF) could transfer unused funds to meet budget shortfalls in education and health. The Ambassador further noted that it is important for the MoE to focus on building its capacity to receive direct USG funding as was done by the Ministry of Public Health.

19. (U) Minister Wardak thanked the Ambassador, the USAID Mission Director and the USG Education Team for all of their assistance, but expressed some frustration with the USG's relatively low level of assistance to education compared to other sectors. He noted that education is the prerequisite to success in other sectors and to underfund it is to undo the sustainability of other commitments.

The Ambassador and USAID Mission Director noted that USG investments in education are somewhat understated since the District Delivery Program (DDP) also contributes to MoE efforts at the district level as does some of the US Military's Commander's Emergency Response Program funds (CERP) spending. They further emphasized the USG's commitment to education as a long-term investment in the future of Afghanistan. The extent of the contributions will become more evident with further development of the DDP in the coming months.

CLOSED SESSION

110. (SBU) In a private meeting with the Minister, the Ambassador noted the importance of the May Kabul Conference in which the GIROA will make a compact with its citizens about its commitments to them. Since the event will be witnessed by many visiting dignitaries and foreign governments it will be an excellent opportunity to showcase to the world the progress Afghanistan has been made. The Ambassador noted that while he is confident that the necessary policy outcomes will be achieved at the conference, the showcasing of Kabul presents a much larger challenge. He discussed using the opportunity to present Kabul as a functioning city conducting business like most other world capital to counter the incorrect image of Kabul as a city of extremists and violence. Ambassador Eikenberry encouraged Wardak to persuade Karzai to form a committee commensurate with this important task. He added that GIROA should have one committee established to "unite papers" and another to "organize a diplomatic Olympics" with the latter requiring an Afghan luminary to head it. (NOTE: Post will continue to engage with Karzai and other leaders to reinforce this message.)

111. (SBU) Ambassador Eikenberry also broached the subject of Parliamentary Elections. He noted that the USG was satisfied that security will be better than last year, and that the delay will allow security arrangements to be solidified and provide opportunity for further electoral reform. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG was concerned about electoral reform and that Karzai must take immediate action if there is to be any meaningful progress. He commented that the expiration of the chairmanship of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) might be an opportunity to change what many donors consider to be one of Afghanistan's biggest impediments to electoral reform. Ambassador Eikenberry concluded that the reform process must remain collaborative - not confrontational.

112. (U) COMMENT: Minister Wardak continues to be an excellent ally on many fronts. He remains a tireless promoter of education for all in Afghanistan as well as a strong advocate for increased assistance - volunteering to travel to the United States to meet with key decision makers in the USG. Minister Wardak will be an increasingly

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valuable friend as the Minister of Education and as the new Human Resource Development cluster lead as Post sets its sights on a successful 2010. END COMMENT.

EIKENBERRY